

## **Case 1: Learning Disabilities**

### **Learning objectives**

- Define learning disabilities, explain their prevalence and causes, and outline the development of the learning disabilities field.
- Describe characteristics of individuals with learning disabilities.
- Explain both traditional and emerging approaches for identifying learning disabilities.
- Describe recommended educational practices for students with learning disabilities.
- Explain the perspectives and concerns that parents and families of students with learning disabilities may have.

## Case

### *Danielle*

Danielle just started middle school. She likes having several different teachers, but she is having difficulty remembering the locations of all the classrooms and the names of all the teachers. She is finding that she also has to remember to keep all her texts with her, take home the right materials to complete her homework, and more promptly from class to class—all tasks involving organizational skills, which are a struggle for her. Danielle is also a little worried about whether she will pass all her classes. She likes her science teacher, and completing all the practical examples and lab activities makes it easy to learn. In her other subjects, though, the amount of reading already seems endless. Danielle reads very slowly and often does not understand what she has read. She is hoping her resource teacher will have tapes of some of the books or study guides similar to those she used in fifth grade. Danielle is glad that her best friend Sophie from elementary school is in her classes; Sophie often helps Danielle indirectly by including her in conversations with other students. Danielle was identified as having a learning disability in third grade, and she has received special education services since then. In middle school two of her classes will be co-taught, and she can also work with the resource teacher during the advisory period, a time during the day when all students can receive extra assistance from their teachers.

## **Introduction**

Have you ever been in a class—perhaps math or a foreign language—and suddenly realized that you had absolutely no understanding of the information being presented? Even after reviewing your notes and asking questions of classmates, you simply did not grasp the concept. Perhaps the experience left you questioning your abilities and feeling incapable of learning. Have you ever become disoriented while driving in an unfamiliar area? Not only did you not know how to get to your destination, but you also were not sure which direction was north or how to get back on your way. Friends may have found your situation funny, but your sense of discomfort was tinged with panic.

Neither of these experiences by itself indicates a learning disability (LD), but it can give you a small insight into what it is like to have a learning disability and how students with learning disabilities often experience frustration and a sense of failure, particularly in schools. Their special needs may affect their ability to learn to read, to compute, to speak, to write, or any combination of these. These students may experience difficulty remembering, and they may show gaps in their social skills. Students with learning disabilities often are described as “puzzle children” because they can be highly proficient in one area (e.g. math) and significantly delayed in another (e.g., reading).

## **What Are Learning Disabilities?**

Compared to other disability areas, the field of learning disabilities has had a relatively brief and intense evolution (Hallahan & Mercer, 2001), the work of medical professionals, psychologists, educators, and parents all contributed to the current understanding of this disorder.

### **Development of the Learning Disabilities Field**

#### *A Focus on Process Interventions*

The study of learning disabilities began long before the term was introduced. As early as the nineteenth century, researchers were interested in how injuries to the brain affected adults' functioning (Opp, 1994). In the 1940s the work that had been conducted primarily with adults was applied to children. During the latter part of the 1940s and throughout the 1950s, emphasis shifted to designing interventions to help children's learning when they exhibited the characteristics no known to indicate learning disabilities. The first public use of the phrase learning disability is attributed to Sam Kirk, an early leader in the field, who used the term while speaking to a parent group in 1963. By 1969 the first federal legislation acknowledging learning disabilities had been enacted. This law, the Children with Specific Learning Disabilities Act (Public Law 91-230), definitively established learning disabilities as a disability category, and it provided funding for teacher training (Lerner & Kline, 2006).

#### *Focus on Instructional Interventions*

Even as learning disabilities were being recognized formally, controversy began. In particular, during the 1960s and early 1970s the process-based interventions that had become the hallmark of the field began to be criticized. A new group of researchers failed to find that such interventions had a direct positive effect on student achievement, and they argued that direct instruction of academics, not the remediation of processing ability, was the superior way to help these students learn (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1976). When research continued to show the effectiveness of direct academic instructional approaches, interest in process methods eventually ebbed (Hammill, 1993). From the 1980s into the beginning of the twenty-first century, there have been continued attempts to understand learning disabilities scientifically, to explore alternative instructional methods for students with learning disabilities, and to clarify the nature of learning disabilities in adults.

## **Definitions of learning Disabilities**

### ***Federal Definition***

The federal definition of learning disabilities articulated in P.L. 94-142 in 1975 has changed very little since then. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA),

Specific learning disability means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculation, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Specific learning disability does not include a learning problem that arises primarily as the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

### **Prevalence of Learning Disabilities**

Learning disabilities has been the fastest-growing category of special education since the federal law was first passed in 1975. According to annual data gathered as part of IDEA during the 2002-2003 school year, approximately 2.8 million students between ages six and twenty-one had learning disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). This number represented about 4.3 percent of the entire school population.

### **Causes of Learning Disabilities**

#### ***Physiological Causes***

Several possible physiological causes of learning disabilities have been identified by education professionals and medical researchers. These include brain injury, heredity, and chemical imbalance.

#### ***Curriculum and Environmental Contributors***

For some children learning disabilities are caused by the situations in which they live. For example, children who have poor nutrition may develop learning disabilities, as may those who live for an extended period of time in a highly adverse emotional climate. Some students have learning disabilities because of toxins in their environment. Yet other children may have too little stimulation. Some students have learning disabilities because of poor instruction.

## **What Are the Characteristics of Individuals with Learning Disabilities?**

### **Cognitive Characteristics**

Students with learning disabilities may have poor selective attention, visual or auditory perception problems, poor memory and information processing.

### **Academic Characteristics**

Most students with learning disabilities experience significant problems in reading. Another academic area that can be a significant problem for students with learning disabilities is oral language. For some students, learning disabilities are manifested in written language.

### **Social and Emotional Characteristics**

Understanding the social and emotional characteristics of students with learning disabilities is as important as understanding their cognitive and academic traits. How students perceive themselves and others and how adept they are in social situations can significantly affect their learning success (Welsh, Parke, Widaman, & O'Neil, 2001). Further, their accomplishments in life may depend on this ability to interact effectively with others. Two areas are particularly relevant: social perception and motivation.

### **Behavior Characteristics**

It is unclear whether the behaviors are part of the learning disability or a result of the frustration that many of these students experience (Farmer, 2000). One of the difficulties in discussing the behavior characteristics of students with learning disabilities is the fact that a significant number of these students have co-morbid (i.e., occurring simultaneously) learning disabilities and attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

## **How Are Learning Disabilities Identified?**

### **Traditional Approach to Assessment for Learning Disabilities**

#### *Criteria for Eligibility*

In schools using a traditional approach to identifying learning disabilities, once assessment data have been gathered, the multidisciplinary team convenes. Using all of the assessment information, the team then decides whether a student meets the eligibility criteria for having a learning disability using these questions:

1. Does a significant gap exist between the student's ability and academic achievement?
2. Is the learning problem the result of a disorder in an area of basic psychological processing involved in understanding language?
3. Can other possible causes of the learning problem be eliminated?

### **A New Approach for Identifying Students Who Have Learning Disabilities**

The traditional approach to identifying the presence of learning disabilities has been criticized as a “wait to fail” model because students must progress far enough in school and experience significant academic frustration to even be considered as having learning disabilities (Lyon et al., 2001). Response to intervention (RTI) represents a federally legislated option for addressing these problems. RTI is permitted, not required, in IDEA 2004, and it is receiving widespread attention. It includes these principles:

1. It replaces the ability-achievement discrepancy criteria with a simple direct assessment of the extent of a student's underachievement. This solves the problem of identifying young children and providing early intervention because it eliminates the need to wait for a discrepancy to emerge.
2. It removes the provision that inadequate instruction, emotional disturbance, and cultural or social issues make a student ineligible for services as learning disabled. In RTI, if learning problems are extreme, the reasons for them are not as important as providing assistance to the student.
3. It requires measures of a student's achievement on well-designed early instructional interventions (especially in prekindergarten through second grade) as part of the assessment process. Doing so ensures that the quality of instruction will be high as well as provides clear documentation of efforts to address student learning problems (Lyon et al., 2001).

## **What Are Recommended Educational Practices for Students with Learning Disabilities?**

For more than two decades, professionals have been investigating which techniques and methods are most effective for addressing the academic, cognitive, social, and behavioral needs of students with learning disabilities. A wealth of research information now is available to guide teachers' practices (e.g., Jitendra, Edwards, Sacks, & Jacobson, 2004; Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003). It indicates that two methods, used in combination, are most effective for most students, regardless of age or specific type of learning disability: direct instruction (DI) and strategy instruction (SI).

### **Direct Instruction**

Direct instruction is based on these guiding principles:

1. Present lessons in a well-organized, sequenced manner.
2. Begin lessons with a short review of previously learned skills necessary to begin the lesson.
3. Begin lessons with a short statement of goals. Provide clear, concise explanations and illustrations of what is to be learned.
4. Present new material in small steps with practice and demonstrations at each step. Provide initial guidance through practice activities.
5. Provide students with frequent opportunities to practice and generalize skills.
6. Ask questions to check students' understanding, and obtain responses from everyone.

### **Strategy Instruction**

Strategies are techniques, principles, and rules that guide students to complete tasks independently, such as note-taking or writing strategies.

## **What Are the Perspectives of Parents and Families?**

Parents of children with learning disabilities often are not aware of their child's special needs until the child is enrolled in school and experiences frustration and failure in academic tasks. It is important to remember that the disability label often affects parents of students with learning disabilities in ways that school professionals cannot completely understand (Lardieri, Blacher, & Swanson, 2000). Many parents will have to redefine their image of their child. Especially if a child is identified during middle or high school, some parent may blame school personnel for their child's problems. Other parents may believe that they have failed their child and that they should have been able to prevent the disability. Teachers need to be aware that their attitudes toward parents, their communications with them, and their openness to parent and family perspectives can affect greatly the quality of the student's education and support received from home. In fact, one of the most common concerns expressed by parents of students with learning disabilities about school services is the frequency (i.e., too little) and focus (e.g., negative instead of positive) of communication from teachers and other professionals.

## **Back to the Case**

### *Danielle*

You will be working with Danielle in your classroom next semester. Prior to meeting with her for the first time, you will need to find strategies and adjust your curriculum to help Danielle become more organized so that she can be independent and academically successful in middle and high school. Based on the information provided in Danielle's folder, prepare a summary of strategies and curriculum designs you think are appropriate to meet Danielle's organizational challenges. Include the rationale for your recommendations.

Students with Learning Disabilities—Key Points Extracted from Marilyn Friend (2008) *Special Education: Contemporary Perspectives for School Professionals*, Chapter 5.

***Use with Caution:*** The contents of this file are some key points extracted from the book, *Special Education: Contemporary Perspectives for Schools Professionals*, written by Marilyn Friend (2008). These contents are only for your instruction preparation resources. If you use any information from this file in your course, please make sure that you give a clear citation in order to avoid plagiarism. In addition, if your class does not use this book as CEP240 does, printing all of the information for class use may violate copy right. It is suggested that you should use the information in this file as references or resources when developing your own course and you should give a clear citation if you use any information from this file in your course.